MLS Next Pro to have no salary cap, other key differences from MLS structure, sources say

By Jeff Rueter (/author/jeff-rueter/) Jan 14, 2022

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A new soccer league kicks off in North America this year, as MLS Next Pro looks to begin play in March. The league will operate at the third level of the United States soccer pyramid, with 20 MLS clubs fielding second teams and Rochester New York FC (https://theathletic.com/3001530/2021/12/06/mls-next-pro-were-going-to-use-this-new-league-as-a-way-to-test-concepts/) serving as the inaugural independent member.

Beyond the stable of participants, little has been announced about how the league will operate once it debuts. The league appointed long-time MLS executive Charles Atlchek as its president while hiring Ali Curtis as senior vice president of competition and operations on the back of his work at both the MLS head office and, more recently, with the New York Red Bulls and Toronto FC.

The past couple of months have mostly been spent finalizing the league's sporting rules and regulations, which sources say is still an ongoing process. But some details have been finalized and articulated to clubs as they begin to build their second teams.

MLS is known for having a complicated set of rules governing how its teams can build their rosters. Mechanisms like allocation money and the designated player rule aren't found in other competitions across the world, while processes like the waiver draft and unrestricted free agency guidelines much more closely mirror American sports leagues than other soccer circuits.

However, MLS Next Pro will not emulate those bylaws. According to several sources, there will not be a salary cap for teams in the third-division league. Additionally, there is neither a minimum nor a maximum salary which teams can pay their players. That flexibility could allow for some clubs to take fliers on players coming from European leagues that can offer higher wages for young domestic players than MLS.

Another important detail is that players will be signing their agreements with each individual team, rather than being signed to the league itself, as first-team players are. As a result, teams and players will have more flexibility as they negotiate pay structures, bonuses and other clauses. The base contract is not standardized across the league, sources say; however, the fact that every team but Rochester has an MLS club means that the deals follow a very similar template across all of MLS Next Pro.

Because players' contracts are with the clubs, they won't be able to be traded across MLS Next Pro as they are in MLS. Instead of being able to swap players outright, any player movement will require a cash transfer fee and that player negotiating a completely new contract with their potential future club. Teams will not be able to use MLS mechanisms like allocation money and SuperDraft picks to acquire a player from another MLS Next Pro team, which is particularly great news for Rochester, who would not have access to these means.

While players won't be traded, there is a chance that teams will still be making deals akin to those in MLS. Each MLS Next Pro team will have seven international slots as they build their rosters. As is the case in MLS, these can be traded to other teams for designated lengths of

time. Again, these deals will not be able to incorporate MLS-specific assets, with MLS Next Pro trades being limited to mechanisms within that league's individual ecosystem. Most likely, these transactions will also involve cash changing hands, as is the case for USL clubs who move their international slots across the league.

Teams won't have requirements on how many players are on MLS Next Pro contracts; however, multiple sources expect teams to carry at least 12 contracted players. Teams will operate with a 24-man roster limit, but that number could rise up to 35 with an additional 11 amateur academy players. Teams will be required to have at least half of their players on the field (six or more) be professional players on contracts, leaving a maximum of five amateurs at any given time.

As for how player rights will work: MLS teams will have rights over MLS Next Pro players provided they fit into three categories. The first is any player in their academy or under a homegrown contract, widely expected to be the predominant type of player for most teams in this league. The second is the league's rule over players selected in the SuperDraft, as teams hold protection over these collegiate players for three successive transfer windows.

The third group will be more subjective and fluid, as teams will be able to claim discovery priority on a number of players under the age of 24 who are neither homegrowns nor SuperDraft selections. Teams used to have a limit of three such claims to make, however sources expect this number to increase as MLS Next Pro gives greater relevance to such priorities.

In the event that Team A wants to sign an unprotected player from Team B's MLS Next Pro roster, the two sides will have to come to an agreement to acquire the player's rights. Team A would need to put that player on their discovery list to have exclusive negotiating rights to the player. From there, Team A and Team B would negotiate a transfer or loan agreement to settle their business before Team A could negotiate terms with the player for a contract.

While these details won't be the entire, comprehensive framework for the league, they give plenty of insight into how MLS Next Pro will function differently from MLS at a roster level. Teams will have additional freedoms to build their second teams in ways that could help them take more gambles on high-potential players who wouldn't immediately contribute at an MLS level. Additionally, the inability to trade MLS mechanisms will help establish a transfer market within the league's structure, which will be fascinating to follow alongside the growing

markets in fellow-third division leagues NISA (https://theathletic.com/2887201/2021/10/13/amid-crowded-lower-division-landscape-nisa-is-spreading-the-open-system-gospel-in-american-soccer/) and USL League One (https://theathletic.com/2378079/2021/02/09/usl-league-one-transfers/). The level of sophistication also sends a clear message that this league is being designed more carefully than the bygone MLS Reserves, which should be good news for players and staff involved.

MLS declined to comment on specifics, but a spokesperson offered a statement: "We are excited for the start of MLS NEXT Pro's inaugural season and continue to prepare for the launch in late March. Over the coming weeks, we will announce additional details including roster rules and regulations and the schedule for the 2022 season."

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Jeff Rueter (/author/jeff-rueter/) is a staff writer for The Athletic who covers North American soccer. Prior to joining in 2019, his work appeared in the Guardian, ESPN FC, Sky Sports, and FourFourTwo USA. Rueter's cover story for Howler Magazine (Winter 2017/18) was a Best American Sports Writing 2019 notable honoree. Follow Jeff on Twitter **@jeffrueter (https://twitter.com/jeffrueter)**.

49 COMMENTS

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TJ M. Jan 14

Great stuff, Jeff. Any inkling on where MN2FC will play their home games? I'm hoping for NSC but I'm guessing they'll just use Allianz since it may be easier for stadium staff go to a stadium they're already